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Lincoln

ADDRESS

BY THE

HON. HENRY CABOT LODGE

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

One Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

February 12, 1909



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ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE A JOINT CONVENTION OF THE SENATE AND HOUSE
OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
GENERAL COURT OF MASSACHUSETTS,
ON FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1909,

BY THE

HON. HENRY CABOT LODGE,

ON THE

OCCASION OF THE ONE-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.



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BOSTON, MASS.

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ADDRESS.

MR. PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, YOUR EXCELLENCY, SENATORS AND GENTLEMEN OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES:—By your kind request I am here. An invitation from you is to me a command which it is at once an honor and a pleasure to obey. But in thus honoring me you have suddenly imposed upon me a duty which it is not easy worthily to fulfill. You have asked me to address you upon this, the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln; to express for you and to you some of the thoughts which ought to find utterance when, on the completion of the century, we seek to pay fit homage to the memory of that great man.

I know not how it may be with the many others who, in these days of commemoration, will speak of Lincoln, but to me the dominant feeling, as I approach my subject, is a sense of helplessness, and a sharp realization of the impossibility of doing justice to such an occasion. To attempt here a review of his life would be labor lost. Ten stately volumes by those who lived in closest communion with

him, and who knew him best, were not more than adequate to tell fitly the story of his life. That story too, in varying form, is known to all the people, "familiar in their mouths as household words." From the early days of dire poverty, from the log cabin of the shiftless pioneer, ever moving forward in search of a fortune which never came, from the picture of the boy working his sums or reading his Bible and his Milton by the red light of the fire, the marvelous tale goes onward and upward to the solemn scene of the second inaugural, and to the burial of the great chief amid the lamentations of a nation. We know it all, and the story is one of the great treasures of the American people.

Still more impossible would it be in a brief moment here to draw, even in the barest outline, a sketch of the events in which his was the commanding presence, for that would be to write the history of the United States during the most crowded and most terrible years of our existence as a nation. Yet if Lincoln's life and deeds, by their very magnitude, thus exclude us from any attempt even to enumerate them, there is, nevertheless, something still better which we can do upon this day, forever made memorable by his birth. We can render to him what I venture to think is the truest homage, that which I believe he would prize most, and compared to which any other is little more than

lip service. We can pause to-day in the hurry of daily life and contemplate that great, lonely, tragic figure, that imagination with its touch of the poet, that keen, strong mind with its humor and its pathos, that splendid common sense and pure character, and then learn from the life which the possessor of all these qualities lived, and from the deeds which he did, lessons which may not be without value to each one of us in our own lives, in teaching us the service which we should render to our country. Let me express my meaning, with slight variation, in his own immortal words:—

The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what he did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which he who fought here has thus far so nobly advanced.

In this spirit I am about to suggest a few thoughts among the many which have come to me as I have meditated upon the life of Abraham Lincoln, and upon what, with that great theme before me, I should say to you to-day.

I desire first, if I can, to take you back for a moment to the living man, and thereby show you what some of his trials were and how he met them, for in doing so I believe we can learn better how to deal with our own problems. I think, too, that if we thus look upon him with considerate eyes, we shall be inspired to seek, in public affairs,

for more charitable and better instructed judgments upon public men and public events than are common now. We are apt, unconsciously and almost inevitably, to confuse in our minds the Lincoln of to-day, the Lincoln of history, as he dwells in our hearts and our imaginations, with the actual man who was President of the United States in the dark days of the civil war, and who struggled forward amid difficulties greater, almost, than any ever encountered by a leader of men.

Mankind has never lost its capacity for weaving myths or its inborn love for them. This faculty, or rather this innate need of human nature, is apparent in the earliest pages of human history. The beautiful and tragic myths, born of the Greek imagination, which have inspired poets and dramatists for three thousand years, come to us out of the dim past with the light of a roseate dawn upon them. They come to us alike in the great verse of Homer and veiled in the gray mists of the north, where we descry the shadows of fighting men and hear the clash of swords and the wild screams of the Valkyries. The leaders of tribes, the founders of States, the eponymous and autochthonous heroes in the infancy of civilization were all endowed by the popular imagination with a divine descent and a near kinship to the gods. We do not give our heroes godlike ancestors, although I have seen a book which traces the

pedigree of Washington to Odin, but when they are great enough we transmute the story of their lives into a myth, just like the Greeks and the Norsemen. Do not imagine from this that I am about to tell you of the "real" or the "true" Lincoln. Nothing would be more alien to my purpose, or more distasteful, for I have observed that, as a rule, when these words are prefixed to the subject of a biography it usually means that we have spread before us a collection of petty details and unworthy gossip which presents an utterly distorted view of a great man, which is, in substance, entirely false, and which gratifies only those envious minds which like to see superiority brought down to their own level. Such presentations are as ignoble and base as the popular myth, however erroneous, is loving and beautiful,—a manifestation of that noble quality in human nature which Carlyle has described in his "Hero Worship." I wish merely to detach Lincoln from the myth, which has possession of us all, that his wisdom, his purity and his greatness were as obvious and acknowledged, or ought to have been as obvious and acknowledged, in his lifetime as they are to-day. We have this same feeling about the one man in American history who stands beside Lincoln in unchallenged equality of greatness. Washington, indeed, is so far removed that we have lost our conception of the fact that he was bitterly criticized, that he struggled with many

difficulties, and that his words, which to us have an almost sacred significance, were, when they were uttered, treated by some persons then extant with contempt. Let me give you an idea of what certain people, now quite forgotten, thought of Washington when he went out of office. On the 6th of March, 1797, the leading newspaper of the opposition spoke as follows:—

“Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace” was the pious ejaculation of a pious man who beheld a flood of happiness rushing in upon mankind. If ever there was a time that would license the reiteration of the ejaculation, that time has now arrived, for the man who is the source of all the misfortunes of our country is this day reduced to a level with his fellow-citizens, and is no longer possessed of power to multiply evils upon the United States. If ever there was a period for rejoicing, this is the moment. Every heart in unison with the freedom and happiness of the people ought to beat high with exultation that the name of Washington ceases from this day to give currency to political insults and to legalized corruption. A new era is now opening upon us,—an era which promises much to the people, for public measures must now stand upon their own merits, and nefarious projects can no longer be supported by a name. When a retrospect has been taken of the Washington administration for eight years it is a subject of the greatest astonishment that a single individual should have cankered the principles of Republicanism in an enlightened people just emerging from the gulf of despotism, and should have carried his designs against the public liberty so far as to have put in jeopardy its very existence. Such, however, are the facts, and with these staring us in the face, the day ought to be a jubilee in the United States.

How strange and unreal this sounds to us who know not merely that George Washington led the army of the United States to victory, but that his administration es-

tablished our Union and our government, which Lincoln, leading the American people, was destined to preserve. The myth has grown so powerful that it is hard to comprehend that actual living men were uttering words like these about George Washington.

The same feeling in regard to Lincoln began to take form even earlier than in the case of Washington. The manner of his death made men see, as by a flash of lightning, what he was and what he had done, even before the grave closed over him. Nothing illustrates the violent revulsion of sentiment which then occurred better than the verses which appeared in "Punch" when the news of his death reached England. He had been jeered at, abused, vilified and caricatured in England to a degree which can be understood only by those who lived through that time, or who have turned over the newspapers and magazines, or read the memoirs and diaries of that epoch. In this chorus of abuse "Punch" had not lagged behind. Then came the assassination, and then these verses by Tom Taylor, written to accompany Tenniel's cartoon representing England laying a wreath on Lincoln's bier:—

Beside this corpse, that bears for winding sheet
The Stars and Stripes he lived to rear anew,
Between the mourners at his head and feet,
Say, scurril jester, is there room for you ?

Yes, he had lived to shame me from my sneer,
To lame my pencil and confute my pen;
To make me own this hind of princes peer,
This rail-splitter a true born king of men.

How, at a glance, we see not only the greatness and nobility of the man, forcing themselves upon the minds of men abroad as at home, but how keenly these remorseful verses make us realize the storm of abuse, of criticism and defamation through which he had passed to victory.

From that day to this the tide of feeling has swept on, until, with Lincoln as with Washington, we have become unable, without a serious effort, to realize the attacks which he met, the assaults which were made upon him or the sore trials which he had to endure. I would fain show you how the actual man, living in those terrible years, met one or two of the attacks.

Lincoln believed that the first step toward the salvation of the Union was to limit the area of secession. He wished above all things, therefore, to hold in the Union the border States, as they were then called. If those States were added to the Confederacy the chances of saving the Union would have been seriously diminished. In those same States there was a strong Union feeling and a very weak antislavery feeling. If they could be convinced that the controlling purpose of the war was to preserve the Union

the chances were that they could be held, but if they were made to believe that the real object of the war was the abolition of slavery they would probably have been lost. Lincoln, therefore, had checked Fremont in issuing orders for the liberation of the slaves, and in the first year of the war had done nothing in that direction, for reasons which seemed to him good, and which, to all men to-day, appear profoundly wise. Abolitionists and extreme antislavery men everywhere were bitterly disappointed, and a flood of criticism was let loose upon him for his attitude in this matter, while at the same time he was also abused by reactionaries and by the opposition as a "radical" and "black republican." Horace Greeley, an able editor and an honest man, devoted to the cause of the Union, but a lifelong and ardent opponent of slavery, assailed the President in the New York "Tribune." Here is Lincoln's reply:—

EXECUTIVE MANSION,
WASHINGTON, Aug. 22, 1862.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing," as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be "the Union as it was." If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to de-

stroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe that what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

What a reply that is! Using his unrivalled power of statement he sets forth his policy with a force which drives opposition helpless before it and renders retort impossible. He strips the issue bare of every irrelevant consideration and makes it so plain that no one can mistake it.

This was a case of specific criticism. There were others of a more general nature. A few months after Greeley wrote, Mr. Lincoln received a letter from Mr. Carl Schurz. Mr. Schurz, who has been a familiar figure to the present generation, was an able man and a very eloquent and effective speaker, especially upon economic subjects. He was also fond of criticising other people who were doing work for which they were responsible and not he. His system of criticism was a simple one. He would depict an ideal President, or Cabinet officer, or Senator; put him in an ideal

situation, surrounded by conditions as they ought to be, and with this imaginary person he would then contrast, most unfavorably, the actual man who was trying to get results out of conditions which were not at all as they ought to be, but which, as a matter of fact, actually existed. This method of discussion, of course, presented Mr. Schurz in a very admirable light, and gave him a great reputation, especially with people who had never been called upon to bear any public responsibility at all. When Mr. Schurz was in the Cabinet himself he fell easily into the class which he criticized, and, naturally, bore no relation to the ideal by which he tried other people, but that fact never altered the opinion of his greatness entertained by his admirers. They liked to hear him find fault pointedly and eloquently with their contemporaries, but they forgot or overlooked the fact that in the past he had applied his system to Lincoln, and in that connection the process seems less convincing. Here is Lincoln's reply to Mr. Schurz's criticism:—

WASHINGTON, Nov. 24, 1862.

MY DEAR SIR:—I have just received and read your letter of the 20th. The purport of it is that we lost the late elections and the administration is failing because the war is unsuccessful, and that I must not flatter myself that I am not justly to blame for it. I certainly know that, if the war fails, the administration fails, and that I will be blamed for it, whether I deserve it or not. And I ought to be blamed, if I could do better. You think I could

do better; therefore you blame me already. I think I could not do better; therefore I blame you for blaming me. I understand you now to be willing to accept the help of men who are not Republicans, provided they have "heart in it." Agreed. I want no others. But who is to be the judge of hearts, or of "heart in it?" If I must discard my own judgment and take yours, I must also take that of others; and by the time I should reject all I should be advised to reject, I should have none left, Republicans or others,—not even yourself. For be assured, my dear sir, there are men who have "heart in it" that think you are performing your part as poorly as you think I am performing mine.

In these two letters which I have quoted lie great lessons. There is not a man to-day, whose judgment would be of any value, who does not know that Lincoln, in these instances, was absolutely right, and his critics hopelessly and ignorantly wrong. They teach us that a great executive officer, dealing with the most momentous problems, cannot do everything at once; that he must subordinate the lesser to the greater if he would not fail entirely; that he must do the best he can, and not lose all by striving vainly for the ideally best. He must steer, also, between the radical extremists on the one side and the reactionary extremists on the other,—no easy task, and one which Lincoln performed with a perfection rarely seen among men. Lincoln could have said, with absolute truth, as Seneca's Pilot says, in Montaigne's paraphrase:—

Oh, Neptune, thou mayest save me if thou wilt; thou mayest sink me if thou wilt; but whatever may befall I shall hold my tiller true.

As we look at this correspondence and see how Lincoln was criticized by able men on a point where the judgment of events and of history alike has gone wholly in his favor, is it not well for us, before passing hasty judgment and indulging in quick condemnation, to reflect that the men charged with great public duties may have a knowledge of conditions and possess sources of information which are not known to the world, or even to those who criticize? Both for men in public life, and for those who criticize these men, I think this correspondence contains many lessons in conduct and character which, if taken to heart, will make the public service better and the judgment of the onlooker less hasty.

This thought and the admonition which these glimpses of the past bring to us have been put into noble verse by a poet of our own day, and it is to the poet that we must always turn for the best expression of what we try to say with the faltering words of prose.

A flying word from here and there,
Had sown the name at which we sneered,
But soon the name was everywhere,
To be reviled and then revered:
A presence to be loved and feared,
We cannot hide it or deny
That we, the gentlemen who jeered,
May be forgotten by and by.

Consider, also, the result. Lincoln's paramount purpose was to save the Union, and he saved it. His critics thought he was sacrificing the antislavery cause. He thought otherwise, and he was right. At the accepted time he emancipated the slaves and signed the death warrant of human slavery. Had he struck at the wrong moment he might have ruined the Union cause and thereby left the slaves in bondage. He was a great statesman, and he knew all the conditions, not merely a part of them. He therefore succeeded where his critics would have failed.

Turn now from the difficulties and the criticisms with which Lincoln contended upon his own side, and which surrounded him like a network, through which he had to cut or break his way as best he might, and look with me for a moment at the force with which he was doing battle, and see whether we can also find a lesson there. Lincoln's purpose was to save the Union; the object of those with whom he fought was to destroy it. I am not going to waste time upon that emptiest of all questions, whether the States had the right, under the Constitution, to secede. The purpose of the Constitution, if it had meaning or purpose, was to make a nation out of jarring States, and that it had succeeded in doing so was stated by Webster, once and for all, when he replied to Hayne in the greatest speech ever made in the Senate. Secession was the de-

struction of the Union, whether the Constitution provided for such a contradiction as the right of secession or not. Secession was revolution, and revolution is not to be stopped or to be provided for by paper constitutions. This particular revolution, however, found its reason and its excuse in the doctrine of State rights. Under cover of maintaining the rights of States the Union was to be destroyed. On this issue the war was fought out. The Union was victorious, and the rights of States emerged from the conflict beaten and discredited. The result brought with it a new danger in the direction of a disproportionate growth in the power of the central government, and this peril the fanatics of State rights, and no one else, had brought upon themselves and upon the country. In the first public speech which I ever delivered, some thirty years ago, alas, I said:—

... The principle of State rights is as vital and essential as the national principle itself. If the former, carried to extremes, means anarchy, the latter, carried to like extremes, means centralization and despotism. . . .

Two lessons are clearly written on the pages which record the strife between the inborn love of local independence and the broader spirit of nationality created by the Constitution. One is reverence for the Constitution; the other, a careful maintenance of the principle of State rights.

To these general views I have always adhered, and I repeat them now because I do not wish to be misunderstood in what I am about to say in regard to State rights at the

present time. The subject is one of deep importance and ought never to be neglected. The growth in power of the central government is inevitable, because it goes hand in hand with the growth of the country. There is no danger that this movement will be too slow; there is danger that it will be too rapid and too extensive. The strength of our American system resides in the fact that we have a Union of States, that we are neither a weak and chaotic confederation, nor one highly centralized government. It is of the highest importance that the States should be maintained in all their proper rights and the Constitution scrupulously observed, but when the Constitution is thrust forward every day, on every occasion, serious and trivial alike, whether applicable or inapplicable, and for mere purposes of obstruction, the government of the Union is not injured, but the Constitution is brought into contempt, and the profound respect which we all should feel for that great instrument is impaired. In the same way the rights of the States, the true rights, are again in danger at this time, not from those who would trench upon them, but from those who abuse them, as did the advocates of secession. Nothing can accelerate the growth of the national power to an unwholesome degree so much as the failure of the States, from local or selfish motives, to do their part in the promotion of measures which the good of the whole

people, without respect to State lines, demands. No such reproach, so far as I am aware, lies at the door of Massachusetts. The President of the United States has said, not once but many times, that if every State had adopted corporation and railroad laws like those of Massachusetts there would have been no need of much of that national railroad legislation which he has advised and which has been largely enacted. He has also said, in regard to our laws relating to health, that if every State had the same system there would have been but little need of the pure food act. There are other States which have a record like that of Massachusetts in these directions, but there are many which have not. The result of this neglect, and of local selfishness, has been national legislation and a great extension of the national power, brought on directly either by the failure of the States to act, or by thrusting State interests and State rights across the path of progress.

Take another and far more serious phase of this same question. We can deal with foreign nations only through the United States. By the Constitution a treaty is the supreme law of the land. No State can make a treaty, and yet a treaty is worthless if any State in the Union can disregard it at pleasure. The people of the United States will not long suffer their foreign relations to be imperiled, or permit the peace of the country to be put in

jeopardy, because some one State does not choose to submit to the action of the general government in a matter with which the general government alone can deal. They will not permit a Legislature or a city council to disregard treaties and endanger our relations with other countries. Those who force State rights into our foreign relations will eventually bring on a situation from which those rights will emerge as broken and discredited as they did from the civil war. They were the enemy, powerful in their influence upon the minds of men, with which Lincoln grappled, and which he finally overthrew. The danger to the rights of States does not arise now, any more than it did in 1861, from the incursions of the national government but from the follies of those who try to use them as a cover for resistance to the general government in the execution of the duties committed to it. Congress alone can declare war. The President and the Senate alone can make peace. It is not to be tolerated that one or two States shall assert the power to force the country into war to gratify their own prejudices. Their rights will be protected by the general government sedulously and fearlessly, but if they venture to usurp or to deride the national authority they will be forced to yield to the power of the Union, and the State rights which they have wrongly invoked, and their indifference to the interests of the nation,

will meet the punishment they deserve. The day has passed when one State, or a few States, could interfere with the government of the Union in its own field. Lincoln smote down that baleful theory when he crushed secession and saved the Union. But if we are wise it is to the States themselves that we ought to look for the preservation of the rights of the States, which are so essential to our system of government, and the States can preserve their rights only by doing their duty individually in regard to measures with which the welfare of the people of all the States is bound up, and by not seeking to thwart the general government in the performance of the high functions entrusted to it by the Constitution. If the advocates of the extreme doctrines of State rights use them not for the protection of local self-government, but to promote selfish interests hostile to the general welfare, or still more to embarrass and paralyze the national government in the performance of the duties for which it was created, the people will not endure it, and State rights will be unduly weakened if not swept away,—a result greatly to be deplored.

In the civil war the fighting champions of State rights bound them up with the cause of slavery, which was not only an evil and a wrong, but which was a gross anachronism,—a stumbling block in the onward march of the Re-

public. They and their allies, the copperheads, the southern sympathizers and the timid commercialism of the north, proclaimed that they were conservatives, and denounced Lincoln as a revolutionist. "Radical," "black republican," "tyrant" were among the mildest of the epithets they heaped upon him. Yet the reality was the exact reverse of this. Lincoln was the true conservative, and he gave his life to preserve and construct, not to change and destroy.

The men who sought to rend the Union asunder in order to shelter slavery beneath State rights, the reactionaries who set themselves against the march of human liberty, were the real revolutionists. Lincoln's policy was to secure progress and right by the limitation and extinction of slavery, but his mission was to preserve and maintain the Union. He sought to save and to create, not to destroy, and yet he wrought at the same time the greatest reform ever accomplished in the history of the nation. Let us learn from him that reaction is not conservatism, and that violent change and the abandonment of the traditions and the principles which have made us great is not progress, but revolution and confusion.

One word upon one other text and I have done. In August, 1864, Lincoln one morning asked his Cabinet to sign their names on the back of a sealed and folded paper.

After the election, in the following November, he opened the paper in the presence of his Cabinet, and these words were found written therein:—

EXECUTIVE MANSION,
WASHINGTON, D. C., Aug. 23, 1864.

This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President-elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration, as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterward.

A. LINCOLN.

Was there ever a nobler patriotism shown by any man than is contained in those few lines? What utter forgetfulness of self, what devotion to the country do they reveal. Then, as at the beginning, we see him driving straight forward to his one mighty purpose,—the salvation of the Union. No criticism, no personal or party defeat, nothing could change that great intent. There, indeed, is a lesson to be learned and to be repeated from day to day. We none of us can be an Abraham Lincoln, but we all can try to follow in his footsteps. If we do so the country will rise to ever new heights, as he would fain have had it.

That nation has not lived in vain which has given to the world Washington and Lincoln, the best great men and the greatest good men whom history can show. But if we

content ourselves with eulogy and neglect the teaching of their lives we are unworthy of the heritage they have left us. To us they offer lofty ideals to which we may not, perhaps cannot, attain, but it is only by aiming at ideals which are never reached that the great victories on earth are won. Yet when all is said it is not Lincoln's patient wisdom, his undaunted courage, his large abilities that should really sink deepest into our hearts and minds to-day. Touch, if you can, as he touched, the "mystic chords of memory." Think of that noble character, that unwearied devotion to his country, that gentle heart which went out in sympathy to all his people. No one can recall all this and not feel that he is lifted up and made better. Remember him as he lay dying, having offered up the last great sacrifice on the altar of his country. Then, indeed, you feel his greatness, and you cry out, in the words of Bunyan:—

So Valiant-for-Truth passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

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